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# The Media Trade in Virtual Design

Authors: Giovanni Innella and Paul A. Rodgers, Northumbria University School of Design, UK

## Abstract

As media attention has become a dominating force within the design economy, visibility became the combustible that fuels the current design industry. Designed objects were once real products, but are now often prototypes, props to be exhibited and photographed, whose role is to fill space in the media, raise the media profile of their creators and convey the name of brokers, sponsors and partners. As a result celebrated design objects are now rare pieces that are highly visible in the virtual media, while they are virtually absent from the conventional market. For industry, this trajectory of design makes them props to fill space in the media, raise the media profile of their creators and 'brand' the name of brokers, sponsors and partners. Today a designer has to be successful in the media in order to attract industry attention. This paper observes the way designers make virtue of their visibility in mediated contexts, thus redefining the industrial model of design practice. Simultaneously, the paper looks at the way the media makes use of its influence in a new virtual design context, producing informed speculations for the evolution of design activities. And in order to contextualize this evolution the paper follows a trajectory from the history of design to build a background to this foreground.

KEYWORDS: historiography, design festivals, visibility, design media

## From the Production Industry to the Media Industry

The 1851 Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations held in Hyde Park, sometimes referred to as the Crystal Palace Exhibition, marked a shift in the way design was proposed to the public. Conceived as a commercial consortium, the event was intended to show state-of-the-art industrial progress, and expose audiences to new aesthetic forms (Hobhouse 2004; Zemer Ben-Ari 2011:6–7). Victorian taste dominated this event, and its artefacts rapidly spread across the various social classes of the audience. But the Great Exhibition was not only about trade, goods and the proliferation of a Victorian disposition; it was about the construction of an experience. Refreshments, music, cafes, a stunning location and a series of services including excursion trains and restrooms provided the backdrop to an unprecedented spectacle. The event set the foundation for a new mode of consuming commodities which Louise Purbrick has described as *“a process of looking at representations rather than buying actual objects.”* (Purbrick 2001:15).

The real effect of the Great Exhibition was not one of selling products per se, but introducing audiences to a new form of consumption and experience of artefacts. In such a model the spectacular world of purchase, then represented by the enchanting airy Crystal Palace with all its entertainments and comforts, is well removed from the world of use, like the suffocating homes of the Victorian era. Here objects were morphed into representations of themselves; they became props to be consumed visually, before perhaps being purchased and brought into people's homes (Auerbach 1999; Richards 1991).

However, the media impact was limited considering it was in its infancy and restricted largely to text with some illustrations. The technical evolution of the media industry had still to take its course in terms of coverage, visual accuracy and appeal, thus limiting the circulation of the representation of design. As a consequence the thick official catalogue consisted of a long list of manufacturers with very few

illustrations of the artefacts, and as such a practical and technical book for industry insiders, rather than an enjoyable read (Great Exhibition and Yapp 1851).

The Great Exhibition introduced entertainment in support of trade and consumption, giving importance to the visitors' experience of the event. At the same time, the Royal approval of the event counterbalanced the weightless spirit of the spectacle and gave a tacit endorsement to the aesthetics and products exhibited. In fact, the Great Exhibition of 1851 took place under the direct approval and support of Prince Albert, adding a layer of credibility to the event and everything that was on display. Monetary prizes and Medals bearing the image of Prince Albert and Queen Victoria were awarded to producers that met certain standards, resulting in great recognition for those who received them (Baker, Richardson, and Burton 1999).

Also, the designs showcased at the Great Exhibition were conceived within an economic and political context approved and supported by the British Government of the time. Hence, Royal involvement in the planning of the event promoted design to a developing industry, fuelled by a clear political vision. To the general public, designers were anonymous creators of artefacts, servants of a political and economic plan, while producers were recipients of Royal endorsement. The presence of the fledgling design profession/industry at the Great Exhibition sets the stage for its appearance at future expositions and events that people would pay to attend.

In terms of the thrust of this paper, it is interesting to note that among the artefacts and technologies showcased there were also machines to facilitate and lower the costs of printing processes. So design and the production industry were beginning to foster the means for a new industry—the media industry—which would eventually consume design just as industrial production processes innovation, transforming products into image based commodities to print in catalogues and exhibit in showrooms (Bayley and Partington 1989:45–51).

## Media and Design – The Rise of the Celebrity Designer

As the media industry advanced technologically, Western culture started witnessing the rise of the celebrity phenomenon. Soon, stars from the worlds of politics, sport and entertainment began to populate the pages of magazines and newspapers. It was just a matter of time before design and designers would attract the media gaze. The production and consumption of celebrity in popular culture has been observed and described by several authors including the likes of Benjamin (2008), Adorno (2001), Debord (1983) and Baudrillard (1975), who all suggest the existence of an economy behind the consumption of culture commodities, ranging from art to politics, from music to products. How this model has evolved into the current design industry is the subject of the following sections.

Before most of his contemporaries, French born and American raised industrial designer Raymond Loewy (1893 – 1986) understood the social and cultural implications of his role, well beyond mere industrial production. And very presciently he hired a Public-Relations consultant in order to engage with the media industry (Sudjic 2009). His image and products subsequently became a new form of product for mass-consumption when in October 1949 he appeared on the cover of Time Magazine (fig. 1).

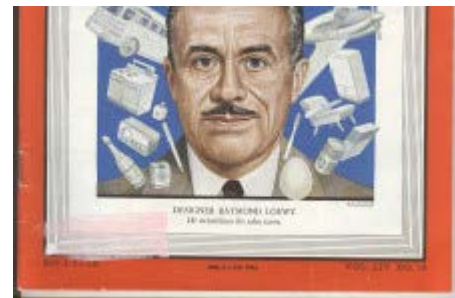
*Fig. 1: Raymond Loewy on the cover to Time Magazine, October 1949.*

Over a decade later, in a somewhat less culturally-engaged manner, the group photo depicting designers George Nelson, Edward Wormley, Eero Saarinen, Harry Bertoia, Charles Eames and Jens Risom posing with their designs on a spread in Playboy magazine constituted a further step in the growth of design in the popular media (fig. 2). (Playboy 1961) However, the main reason



why those designers appealed to the media was because they were successfully modernising lifestyles and the manufacturing economy.

*Fig. 2: George Nelson, Edward Wormley, Eero Saarinen, Harry Bertoia, Charles Eames and Jens Risom Playboy Magazine, July 1961.*



It was not only print that blurred the separation between commerce and culture. Around the same time, the *Useful Objects* (1938 – 1949) and *Good Design* (1950 – 1955) exhibition series merged the commercial production of American industry with the blessing of a recognized cultural institution – the Museum of Modern Art, New York (MoMA). This series of events, aimed at supporting the domestic economy, established a strong association between commercial and cultural institutions (Staniszewski 2001:142–189).

The *Useful Objects* series of exhibitions was conceived with a clear agenda of informing visitors about affordable quality products. The impact of the exhibition series, in all its annual variations on the commercial sphere, was remarkable to the point that the *Useful Objects* name became a seal of approval from MoMA. The *Good Design* series of products (1950 – 1955), also backed by MoMA, led to a range of the products being sold through the Chicago Merchandise Mart. A smaller selection of the same range of products was also sold at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The support and approval of MoMA led to increased product sales during the exhibitions. Similarly, *Good Design* became a regular occurrence within MoMA up until its final event in 1955. Today traces of its ethos can still be found in the MoMA store, where classic furniture and household products can be purchased with the reassuring endorsement of the Museum.



The influential power of MoMA not only transferred its authority from the confines of the Museum to the shopping malls, but also it succeeded in transcending geographical and political borders. The events *Design for Use USA* and *50 Years of American Art*, which were variations of the *Good Design* series, held in Europe under the illustrious trademark of MoMA during the cold war years are evidence of this influence. In these settings MoMA acted as an ambassador, a messenger at the service of the U.S. Government and its political and economic agenda. The American government's use of MoMA as an intermediary proved to be successful, since MoMA represented a reassuring entity even for those countries where the direct involvement of the United States would have awakened unpleasant memories of the recent war (Gay McDonald 2008; G. McDonald 2004) .

Similar to the Great Exhibition of 1851, the *Good Design* series in its various manifestations promoted a new aesthetic of the now consolidated industry of mass-production and added an evident national pride. In doing so, it did not use a political figure as a symbol of credibility, but instead a cultural institution—MoMA. The designers of those artefacts were regarded as authors worthy of space in a prestigious museum traditionally reserved for art, and like artists their signatures were a feature of their designs. These designers were pioneers of a new generation of professionals known and respected by the public. This was not only due to endorsement by MoMA, but also to the media industry, that played a crucial role in this shift.

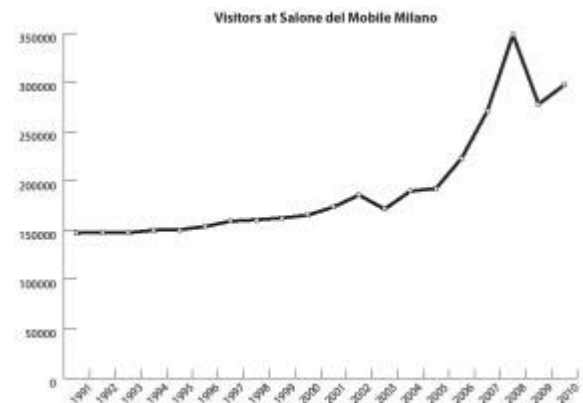
Just like the Great Exhibition, the designs exhibited in the *Good Design* series were integrated with industrialisation and supported by the political agendas of the era. However, a significant difference is that the *Good Design* series represented the handing over of the baton of visibility and credibility from the government to other mediating entities, whether these were private cultural institutions or the media, like popular magazines. Designers therefore started to be more and more exposed, publicly celebrated as authors of a new aesthetic, and recognized as accomplices of the industrious economy. Since then it has been quite easy to trace how design and designers have enjoyed continued growth in terms of media attention, which has had an increasing impact on industry, thus leading to the current situation.

## The Current Situation – The Commoditization of Visibility

The media industry and the events that have recently flourished around design have played a crucial role in cementing design as a strong part of our contemporary visual culture (Sparke 2004). The attention given to design in mediated contexts has grown considerably in the last 10 to 15 years to the point that nowadays it is common for design and design-related stories to be featured regularly in newspapers and lifestyle magazines. Data supporting the growth of the design events can be found in figures from the annual Furniture Fair of Milan, where the number of visitors doubled from 150,000 in 1995 to 348,000 in 2008 (fig. 3) (COSMIT 2011).

*Fig. 3: Number of visitors attending the Salone del Mobile di Milano 1995 – 2012*

The weeklong Milan Furniture Fair, in its most recent configuration, features a central venue organized by COSMIT (Comitato Organizzatore del Salone del Mobile Italiano) showcasing commercial brands. Besides that, there is a satellite venue for young designers, independent designers and design schools. But the most vivid part of the fair consists of a myriad of collateral events happening in disparate locations throughout the City of Milan, which goes under the name of “Fuorisalone”. These events have gained great importance throughout the years, involving established and emerging designers, collectives, schools, brands, design associations and galleries. And the Salone del Mobile (Italian for Furniture Fair) of Milan is just one of the numerous events that fill the calendar of design professionals, educators and aficionados worldwide. However, the Furniture Fair of Milan represents the dominant model of design festivals across Europe and a growing number of extra-European cities such as New York, Miami, Tokyo, Beijing and Hong Kong. In all these contexts the focus is not solely on the products and manufacturers, but also on the entertainment they generate, the presence of celebrated designers and the aesthetics or directions they propose. The scale and cultural relevance of such events now has a significant impact on the reputation of the cities that host them. It is suggested that design festivals can improve the profile of a city in terms of aspects such as liveability, dynamicity and culture, which nowadays are important factors for global rankings. Therefore, through its representation in a mediated context—such as festivals—design has impact far beyond industry and its professional discipline (Sassen 2002; Sedini 2011; Florida 2002).



In the current model for design events each exhibitor is economically self-supported or sponsored by its own commercial partners. These sponsors can vary from design associations, museums of any sort, commercial institutions and so on, and each of these entities follows its own agenda. Interestingly, unlike previous events in design history, like the aforementioned Great Exhibition and the Good Design exhibition series, current major design events usually do not present a central direction or control by governments or museums for the entire event. Anybody who can afford a place in the venue or in the



town hosting the festival is automatically part of the show, responding solely to his or her own direction and agenda, or that of the sponsors. This lack of a central direction has left space for the media to take on the role of guaranteeing credibility and prestige. Consequently, the success of a designer is often represented by the media attention that she or he receives from the design and non-design press (McRobbie 1998). And currently the long lists of publications and participation in design festivals appearing in the websites of young designers are evidence of this phenomenon.

These publications and exhibitions represent a complex network of journalists, editors and brokers that the designer is involved with. This network is what grants the designer, and anybody associated with his or her work, presence in both design events and the media. In short, this network is a big part of what a designer brings with them, which is, to say in one word, “**visibility**”. Statements such as “supported by”, “made possible by”, “in collaboration with”, “commissioned by”, “powered by”, “exhibited at”, “published on”, “winner of”, “media partner”, and so on, are commonly used in press releases and articles and can serve as proof of the complex trading system designers are commonly involved in nowadays.

While attendances have doubled at the Milan Furniture Fair the number of registered journalists has increased fourfold between 1995 and 2010 (now counting over 5000 journalists), indicating the growth in media coverage of international design fairs (fig. 4) (COSMIT 2011). Therefore, an essential strategy for brands, designers and schools taking part in design events is to perform well in the media. Designers that are successful during an international design event are usually prominent in the media and so are their sponsors and supporting partners.

*Fig. 4: Number of journalists attending the Salone del Mobile di Milano 1995 – 2012*

So, on the one hand, designers need to raise their media profile to attract more sponsors, catch the attention of possible clients, or increase their chances of accessing more public funds whilst, on the other hand, media and event organizers continuously look for content to feature on their (web) pages, or exhibitions spaces, to retain their audience/readers and hence their advertisers/sponsors. Entrance to design events is often free, online magazines are freely accessible, and print media design journals are relatively inexpensive, so the ‘imagery’ of design is more and more accessible to everyone. Conversely, the artefacts exhibited are usually not always accessible by larger audiences. As such, the designed objects are often prototypes, props to be exhibited and photographed, whose role is to fill space in the media, raise the media profile of their creators and convey the name of brokers, sponsors and partners. Contemporary designers master the production and circulation of their representation and the representation of their productions; they tie relationships with all the actors that can grant visibility, all the while knowing how to share such visibility with their sponsors. The knowledge and networks that were the platform of design now relate to the media industry, not the production industry.



## Design as Mediated Spectacle

Design can therefore nowadays be seen as a mediated spectacle, rather than part of the production industry. In such a spectacle, it is noticeable how designers can appeal to commercial partners independently from the design services they might offer them. For instance, during the Furniture Fair of Milan 2011, British designer Tom Dixon exhibited in conjunction with electronics company RIM, which was then launching its new product – the Playbook tablet. The connection between Tom Dixon’s designs

and the Playbook was very tenuous; there was no trace of Tom Dixon's design in the RIM products. RIM were simply looking for a stage to advertise its product, while Tom Dixon was looking for resources to use in advertising his recently launched furniture firm. The trade-off offered by Tom Dixon was clearly represented by his visibility at the Furniture Fair of Milan and the resulting media reports. The same interpretation applies to the commission undertaken by Hella Jongerius for banking group HSBC. This commission resulted in the unique table called "Daylight". HSBC obviously does not sell tables or furniture of any sort; the trade-off for HSBC was access to a specific 'market' in order to link its financial services (namely credit); they did it through the table as well as through its author, Hella Jongerius, who is well known in those contexts. The "Daylight" table was then exhibited at the exclusive design event Design Miami and featured on many of the most popular websites and printed design media with a complimentary impact on HSBC's identity and exposure.

These examples clarify that designers trade much more—or just something else—than their design consultancy services. They represent a means for brokers and sponsors to step into the spectacle of design and 'talk' to their market without advertising. In short, visibility is the combustible that fuels the design industry these days. Just like a Formula 1 car or the shirt of a football team, design attracts the attention of entities and institutions in their constant search for greater visibility. The fact that British designer Jasper Morrison provocatively suggests "Salone del Marketing", instead of "Salone del Mobile", as a better name for the Milanese venue, more accurately describes the purpose of the event. The apparent disconnection between the broker and the design generated represents great freedom for designers who no longer have to respond to traditional design briefs. Greater autonomy is granted to them, as their products do not have to generate relevant sales or even serve users. Whereas the previous generation of designers had to be successful within industry in order to appeal to the media, now that relation is inverted: today a designer has to be successful in the media in order to appeal to industry.

The recent trend of design performance is even greater proof of the broker's primary aim of gaining visibility through the design spectacle. During the Salone del Mobile 2009, fashion brand Fendi and the organizers of Design Miami gave birth to the event "Craft Punk". In this case, a selection of young up and coming international designers were invited to produce artefacts in front of the audience throughout the week. Some of the performances involved the use of scrap leather conveying a loose connection with Fendi's activities. Most of the design performances, however, did not produce anything directly associated with Fendi's products, materials or expertise. Remarkably, one of the designers, Tomas Libertiny, was sitting just outside the venue, soldering rotational metal volumes on a lathe. While producing these objects, he was sporting a leather Fendi coat to protect himself from the burning pieces of metal and that is how he was portrayed in the media. That garment worn by the designer determined the only connection with Fendi. One might ask, whether the outcome of such a commission is the object produced, the production process, or the media image of the designer wearing the Fendi coat? It is not very difficult to answer this question, since the media industry operates by transforming everything—whether an artefact, a designer or a performance—into ready-to-be-consumed content for its digital and print portals.

The technological progress of the media industry is also significant. In the digital age the representation of design is almost instantaneous in its production, distribution and consumption. The fact that most of those objects will never get past the stage of prototypes is significant in this sense; their economy as real products is trivial for the production industry, while their presence at the events and on the media is highly utilitarian for both.

Apart from the consolidated small group of celebrity designers that can use their visibility to advertise themselves and their collateral activities, whether these consist of opening a shop (Tord Broontje, Studio Job, Tom Dixon, Piet Hein Eek), running a restaurant (Tom Dixon, Piet Hein Eek), cultivating a personal brand identity (Marcel Wanders, Tom Dixon) or conducting a TV show (Philippe Starck); there are a

number of less famous designers that by being featured in the media just contribute to the media growth in terms of content and audience. This expansion of the media in design, and design in the media, has the potential to impact and change the discipline of design, and therefore warrants the observations and reflections in the next sections of this paper.

## The Media Industry in Design – Where is it Going?

In the growing vacuum of professional journalism, the media's appetite for new content makes them dependent on Press Releases coming directly from the designers and their agents and brokers. This has amplified the reach of the designers and garnered a larger audience. The popular design website, Designboom.com recently reported that after about ten years of activity the number of monthly readers is now 4.2 million. One of its competitors launched in November 2006, Dezeen.com, doubled its 6 million visitors in 2008 to over 12 million in 2009 (Designboom.com 2010; Dezeen.com 2010). Such figures reflect the popularity, and consequently the power of online design media. This power and reach has allowed them to diversify into other activities aside from publishing web posts about design. For instance, Dezeen, which claims to be the largest design magazine in the world, also features a recruitment site, an online watch store, a series of pop-up physical stores in London, a series of talks worldwide, exhibitions in conjunction with international design events, a platform for the promotion of independent music producers and also a printed book. Likewise, Designboom is involved in similar activities. The concentration of the design media on the platform of the internet has partially caused the general downturn in print media. Established design magazines have receded in popularity while others have ceased to exist. The closing of ID magazine in 2009, followed in 2011 by British magazine Design Week, summarize well the hardships of print design media. However, a few publications have emerged or remained resilient – Wallpaper and Monocle have blurred the line between design and other realms, such as lifestyle, popular culture, politics and economics. These magazines find themselves interspersed between print media staples such as Vogue and the Economist in the magazine stands. Their ubiquity within the realm of information and communication has allowed them to cover any matter, while still keeping a strong correlation with design. They can publish city guides; award selected designers and designs with yearly titles; commission, produce, brand and distribute their own items. They can even open sleek design shops in the trendiest cities around the globe. The print and web media that have embraced new business and content models are influential actors within the design industry. It is not by chance that Dezeen has been included by Time magazine as one of the "100 most influential forces in global design".

As for the organizers of design events, a similar observation can be made. Think of the transmigration to Berlin of the Ventura Lambrate exhibitions, one of the main venues at the Milan Fuorisalone. It is evident how the credibility and charm of the Ventura Lambrate venue is easily adopted outside of the homonymous Milanese neighbourhood to better advertise events. Also the recent acquisition of the annual 100% Design London event by company Media 10 Ltd. for an undisclosed price, invites us to reconsider design events as goods in their own right and with their own economies.

The mediating entities have expanded within the design industry to the point where they can be legitimately considered not just representatives of design, but representations of design, and therefore a peculiarity of the spectacle blurring the difference between representation and content, giving to both the same weight and appeal. The result of the overlap of the medium with the content is that media "became design" on par with the designers, the brands and the design schools they feature. Hints of this shift were already evident in 1983, when Domus Academy—a design school—sprang from the rib of Domus Magazine—the oldest design medium.

Similar to design brands and designers, the design media possess the visibility, aesthetics and appeal of design, so that distinguishing between these entities and their roles becomes a hard task for consumers. Dezeen, Design Miami, Tom Dixon, Cappellini, Design Academy Eindhoven, just to mention a few, all



equally represent design simply because they all enjoy and offer visibility and prominence in the design context, independently from their tangible presence in the industry. The image-based essence of contemporary design allows great fluidity among designers, design brands and design media, which in fact overlap by engaging in similar activities.

## Conclusions

In this paper we present the case that visibility is the dominant commodity being traded in contemporary design today. Designers appear tied to a complex network of brokers, event organizers, editors, manufacturers, bloggers, journalists and so on. Anybody commissioning a designer benefits from these relationships and gains visibility. Designers' trading visibility for viability affects the nature of their commissions to the point that they don't have to respond to traditional design briefs. They can simply associate their names with clients of any sort, offering them a place in the spotlight of design events, on the glossy pages of design magazines or on popular design websites.

But visibility is not only a commodity to be traded, it is also a resource for designers to engage in activities other than design. For example, Tom Dixon opened a shop and a restaurant on the periphery of London; Piet Hein Eek did the same in Eindhoven; Tord Boontje started a design shop in London. These businesses, which don't show any apparent innovation in their models, represent in reality a significant shift in the designers' role. If not for their brokers, designers became advertisers of themselves and their collateral activities. The dramatic shift in the activities of the professional designer is poignantly evident if you try to imagine Charles and Ray Eames opening a restaurant in Santa Monica, LA in the 1960's.

So what does this shift signal? Web and print media, as well as organized events, have grown in size and power within the design sphere to such an extent that they are beginning to appropriate design. Up to now a somewhat egalitarian situation has endured among designers, brands and the design media. Given the present financially delicate situation that most design manufacturers and distributors are experiencing, it is quite possible that the design media, as well as designers, now capable of producing and distributing their own products, supersede traditional design brands. After all, in the near future it would not be beyond the powers of prediction for Dezeen or Wallpaper to release their first collections of furniture and products.

Such a possibility inverts the relationship between design and distribution. While traditionally a brand commissions a prominent designer to enhance visibility, it is now possible to imagine it will be the organizations that grant visibility defining both designer and brand. This means they could employ anonymous designers to produce the items they will feature in their (web) pages and exhibition spaces, as well as in the on-line and physical shops that they have already started to open. Only time will affirm or refute these speculations, but it is undeniable that the media industry is now embedded in the design industry, becoming an integral part of it. Visibility has therefore become the muse and the currency of contemporary design, all to the good of those who own and manage such currency.

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## Biographies

**Giovanni Innella** is a PhD candidate at the Northumbria University School of Design. Giovanni studied at the Politecnico di Torino and Design Academy of Eindhoven. He worked for the Interaction Design Institute Ivrea and the Madeira Interactive Technologies Institute. Giovanni led projects in Europe and Africa, exhibiting at the International Design Biennale of Saint-Etienne, the Fuorisalone of Milan, amongst other venues. Giovanni's jewellery piece for brand CHP...? is part of the permanent collection of the Stedelijk Museum of 's-Hertogenbosch.

**Paul Rodgers** is Professor of Design Issues at Northumbria University's School of Design. He has had a distinguished and extensive career in design research. Prior to joining Northumbria University's School of Design in November 2009, he was Reader in Design at Edinburgh Napier University between 1999 and 2009 and a post-doctoral Research Fellow at the University of Cambridge's Engineering Design Centre between 1996 and 1999. He also worked at the University of Wolverhampton as a senior lecturer in Product Design between 1995 and 1996. He holds a BEd (Hons.) in Design and Technology, a MA in Computing in Design (both from Middlesex University), and a PhD in Product Design Assessment (from the University of Westminster). He has over 20 years experience in product design research, working with a range of commercial, public and third sector organizations such as BAE Systems, Caterpillar, NCR, National Museums Scotland, and the Design Council. He has led as Principal Investigator several research projects for the Research Councils in the UK and a number of design projects funded by the Scottish Government and The Lighthouse (Scotland's National Centre for Architecture, Design, and the City). He has published more than 100 papers in book chapters, journals and conferences. He sits on the Editorial Review Board of many international design conferences including the Design Research Society (DRS), International Association of Societies of Design Research (IASDR), Design Computing and Cognition (DCC), and Engineering and Product Design Education (EPDE) and is a member of the Editorial Board of the International journals Design Studies and Design Creativity.

## Addresses for Correspondence

**Giovanni Innella**, Northumbria University School of Design, City Campus East, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE1 8ST, UK Tel: +44 (0)191 227 4913 Email: [giovanni.innella@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:giovanni.innella@northumbria.ac.uk)

**Paul Rodgers**, Northumbria University School of Design, City Campus East, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE1 8ST, UK Tel: +44 (0)191 227 4913 Email: [paul.rodgers@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:paul.rodgers@northumbria.ac.uk)

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